

Report

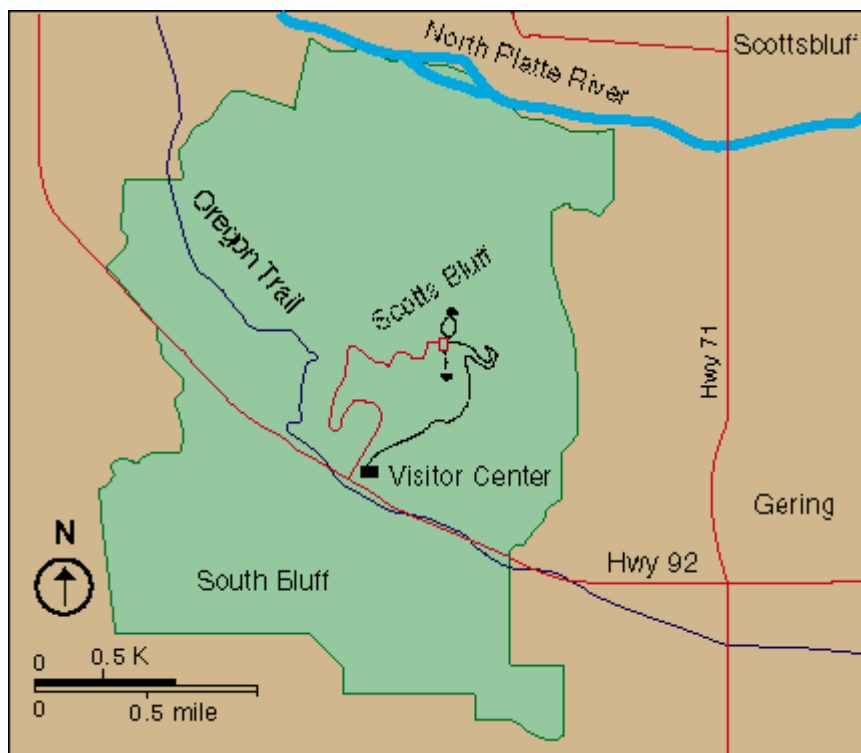
Scotts Bluff National Monument

■ 1.0 Site Description

Scotts Bluff National Monument consists of 3,000 acres encompassing Scotts Bluff, Mitchell Pass and adjacent prairie lands. Scotts Bluff was designated a national monument in 1919. Towering 800 feet above the North Platte River valley, Scotts Bluff was a prominent natural landmark for emigrants on the Oregon Trail, marking the end of the “Great American Desert.” The mission of the monument is to protect the history of the Oregon Trail and to protect the vista provided by Scotts Bluff.

The monument is located in extreme western Nebraska, approximately three miles west of Gering, Nebraska and approximately five miles southwest of Scotts Bluff, Nebraska (see Figure 1). Primary access is provided via State Highway 92. Visitors traveling east-west on Interstate 80 exit at Kimball and drive 45 miles north on State Highway 71 to connect with State Highway 92.

Figure 1. Map of Scotts Bluff National Monument



The Oregon Trail Museum contains exhibits about the human and natural history of the area and also holds a unique collection of watercolor paintings by the frontier photographer and artist William Henry Jackson. Other attractions include hiking trails and the remnants of the Oregon Trail. Summit Road allows visitors to drive to the top of Scotts Bluff for a spectacular view of the valley. A free shuttle to the summit is provided during the summer.

Scotts Bluff NM attracts approximately 150,000 visitors per year. Except for peaks corresponding to special anniversaries (e.g., 150th anniversary of the Mormon Trail), visitation has been relatively stable in recent years. Although Scotts Bluff NM is open year around, visitation is heaviest during the summer months, and lowest during January. Daily peaks occur between mid-morning and mid-afternoon.

Most visitors drive their own vehicles to the monument. A small number of visitors arrive by tour bus. School buses bring student groups in the spring and fall. A typical visitor spends one to two hours at the monument. The most popular activities include visiting the museum, seeing the remnants of the Oregon Trail, hiking the trails, observing prairie flowers and wildlife, and driving to the summit.

The overall General Management Plan for Scotts Bluff National Monument was completed in 1997. No formal transportation studies have been completed in the recent past.

■ 2.0 Existing ATS

Currently, the NPS leases and operates a 14-person shuttle bus to transport visitors to and from the summit during the peak four months of the year. The shuttle is driven by a park ranger who provides narration during the short drive to the summit. Revenue from entrance fees is used to cover the cost of the lease and to hire seasonal staff. The shuttle operates between 10:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. at 30-minute headways. The shuttles are typically full during the peak season. Scotts Bluff NM hopes to acquire a new shuttle bus in the spring of 2000. The bus will be similar to the leased buses and will be funded through the Department of Energy. The new shuttle will be operated as needed, possibly for a larger portion of the year.

The 1.5-mile Summit Road is a two-lane paved road with no shoulders. Because of steep grades and the lack of shoulders, bicycles are prohibited while the road is open to motor vehicular traffic (8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. during the summer and 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. during the winter). The road includes three tunnels which can accommodate two-way traffic of passenger cars but only one-way traffic for tour buses. As such, NPS staff essentially close the road for brief periods to allow tour buses to travel to and from the summit uninhibited. During other times, the road generally operates free of congestion. Improvements to the road are unlikely given the potential impacts to monument resources.

■ 3.0 ATS Needs

The Summit Road shuttle represents the only form of alternative transportation currently in operation at Scotts Bluff National Monument. It also represents the best opportunity for additional Alternative Transportation Systems (ATS) at the monument in the form of additional shuttle buses. The addition of one or more shuttle buses would provide the following benefits:

- Reduce headways between shuttles and/or lengthen the duration of the tour.
- Improve the visitor experience by enabling more visitors to experience the summit, by reducing wait times, by managing the flow of visitors, and by providing additional opportunities for interpretation.
- Reduce parking congestion at the summit parking area by reducing the volume of passenger cars that travel to the summit.
- Preserve the natural, cultural and historic resources of the monument.

If parking problems at the visitor center increase as a result of increased visitation, consideration could also be given to construction/implementation of a remote parking system. In this form of alternative transportation, visitors to the monument would park their vehicles in a remote parking lot and ride a transit system to the existing visitor center. There, visitors could connect with the Summit Road shuttle.

■ 4.0 Basis of ATS Needs

The monument is a strong candidate for expansion of alternative transportation through the addition of one or more shuttle buses. The additional shuttle buses would improve the visitor experience, reduce parking congestion at the summit parking area, and preserve the natural, cultural and historic resources of the monument.

■ 5.0 Bibliography

Information from various Internet Web sites.

■ 6.0 Persons Interviewed

Debra Quailey, Acting Superintendent, telephone interview, November 23, 1999